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ABSTRACT

Preventionists have long recognized that the transition from elementary to secondary school represents a period of uncertainty and profound change in young adolescents' lives. This paper offers a research-based primer for teachers and other preventionists. It builds upon the prevention literature that focuses on protective factors as well as the current notion that life transitions may be overlooked as opportunities to help adolescents thrive. It is a call to recognize school transitions as important life events and to promote the development of prevention interventions during these periods. The following topics and theories are examined: transitions, stress, and coping; the transition into adolescence; timing and discontinuity theory; environmental theory; transitional life events theory; role strain theory; theory to practice approaches; and belonging. Answers are listed for the following questions: Who should participate in a school transition program? What should the format of a school transition program look like? and What should be included in a school transition program? Transitions are times of heightened risk as well as opportunities to develop effective coping skills. To turn school transitions from a risk to an opportunity, prevention programming must move beyond skill-building to include interventions that provide children and youth a sense of belonging and a bright future. Contains 34 references. (JBJ)

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ADOLESCENCE, SCHOOL TRANSITIONS, AND PREVENTION
A Research-Based Primer

March 1993

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ADOLESCENCE, SCHOOL TRANSITIONS, AND PREVENTION

A Research-Based Primer

By BethAnn Berliner

Western Regional Center for Drug-Free
Schools and Communities

Far West Laboratory

March 1993

PREFACE

The Western Regional Center for Drug-Free Schools and Communities works with schools and communities to develop comprehensive alcohol and other drug (AOD) prevention and early intervention programs. As we search for "comprehensive prevention," we realize that there are many aspects to a student's life. To quote the author, "This paper offers a research-based primer for teachers and other preventionists. It builds upon the prevention literature that focuses on protective factors as well as the current notion that life transitions may be overlooked as *opportunities* to help adolescents thrive. It is a call to recognize school transitions as important life events and to promote the development of prevention interventions during these periods."

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Change is an inevitable part of life. In fact, there is very little about our world that does not change: seasons change, people mature from infants to elders, history evolves, technology advances. In most cases, changes in an individual's life are considered natural and good. But they can be difficult as well, upsetting that which we know and have become accustomed to. In the case of students in transition from elementary to secondary school, this can be especially so.

Preventionists have long recognized that the transition from elementary to secondary school represents a period of uncertainty and profound change in young adolescents' lives. "My whole life changed," said Yapos Washington, in recalling his first year in high school, as if it were a bad dream. "I went from worrying about nothing to worrying about everything. The message I got was you're grown up now, deal with it."

Difficulties in adjusting to school transitions heighten the potential for developing more serious problems, such as alcohol and other drug use and dropping out of school. For many adolescents, school change coincides with puberty as well as with abrupt and unpredictable life changes, such as parental divorce or the sudden move to a new community. This simultaneous occurrence of so many life changes creates both a serious challenge for youth and an opportunity for preventionists to help them meet that challenge.

Understanding the theories and best practices related to early adolescence and school change are key to developing effective prevention programming. Given that multiple life events occur simultaneously during early adolescence, linking the stressor of school change to the development of problem behaviors has proven difficult. But the literature, while still seeking answers, can help teachers and preventionists to design and implement effective prevention efforts.

This paper offers a research-based primer for teachers and other preventionists. It builds upon the prevention literature that focuses on protective factors as well as the current notion that life transitions may be overlooked as *opportunities* to help adolescents thrive. It is a call to recognize school transitions as important life events and to promote the development of preventive interventions during these periods.

Transitions, Stress, and Coping

Transitions are defined as the movement from "one state of certainty to another with a period of uncertainty in between" (Schilling, Snow, and Schinke, 1988, p.2). What happens during and because of this period of uncertainty is important to applied researchers and preventionists. Because life transitions affect individuals differently, what some view as "stressful life events" or "normal life crises" others simply view as events that occur during the course of life (Garmezy and Rutter, 1983; Felner, Farber, and Primavera, 1983; Fenzel, 1989).

For more than two decades, researchers have studied how the social environment contributes to the development of psychosocial, psychiatric, or physical disorders. In particular, Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Garmezy and Rutter (1983) examine the relationship between changes in one's role or environment with developmental problems. Their work links life changes and the resulting demands for readjustment to stress. Scholars continue to disagree whether life change is

inherently stressful or if confusing or adverse events, such as divorce or school change, are the cause of stress responses such as anxiety or depression.

While the definition of stress and our understanding of how youth cope and adapt to it is still developing, preventionists recognize its impact on the lives of adolescents today. Garmezy and Rutter state that stress is an important concept because "it brings several diverse problem areas together--problems such as school failure, school-age pregnancy, and drug and alcohol use; and environmental stressful events as different as divorce, a death in the family, or the upset caused by a chronic physical disease" (Garmezy and Rutter, 1983, p.xxi).

Early studies focus on the adverse impact of traumatic life events on adolescents such as hospitalization or divorce. The powerful stressors of loss and separation are associated with the emergence of childhood psychopathologies and other related problem behaviors (Garmezy and Rutter, 1983). Researchers and preventionists have since enriched their understanding of the development of problem behaviors by focusing on children's resilience, or the successful adaptation to stress and adversity.

Garmezy and Rutter emphasize that learning to cope with stress is elemental to children's healthy development. Effective coping is a resilient response to stress, functioning both to solve problems and manage emotional trauma. A goal of prevention is to overcome stressful life events and turn them into learning experiences, rather than having them trigger a crisis.

Of the 22 life events that sixth graders judged to be upsetting in a study conducted by Brown and Cowen (1988), school change ranked 14th, well below the death or divorce of parents but more upsetting than a move or the birth of a sibling. The transition from elementary to secondary school represents for many students a stressful move from the nest of a protective, familiar environment with considerable individual attention into an often impersonal, intimidating atmosphere. School size is significantly larger, academic standards are more rigorous, social circles and peer pressures change more profoundly than at any other time in life, discipline is more abruptly delivered, and students often believe their performance is assessed publicly and has lifelong implications.

Numerous other studies identify school transitions as a likely source of stress which subject children and youth "to adaptational challenges that tap their coping skills" (Elias, Gara, and Ubriaco, 1985, p.112; Fenzel and Blyth, 1986). These coping skills typically include:

- redefining roles and expected behaviors;
- shifting membership in and position within social networks;
- reorganizing social support resources;
- restructuring ways of cognitive appraisal; and
- managing the stress associated with uncertain expectations and one's abilities to effectively use the above mentioned skills (Elias, Gara, and Ubriaco, 1985, p.112).

"A lot of people don't realize it, but it's a shock for kids to come to a new school environment," explained Ms. Lupas, a harried ninth grade counselor at a San Francisco high school. "These kids come from the small, intimate elementary school environment to this place," referring to the

graffiti-covered walls, packed classrooms, and littered stairwells typical of other budget-worn urban high schools.

Most adolescents successfully cope with the transition from elementary to secondary school following a brief (less than three months) period of stress and disorganization (Cornille, Bayer, and Smyth, 1983). Safer (1986) and Brown and Cowen (1988) explain that coping difficulties are attributable to many stress-inducing factors, only one of which is the adjustment to a new school. The simultaneous experience of multiple life stressors or the earlier elementary patterns of absenteeism, academic deficiencies, or behaviors related to poverty increase the likelihood of serious adjustment problems. Other studies conclude that adjustment difficulties are likely due to the mismatched teaching, learning, and organizational environment of the secondary school. The developmental needs of early adolescents and the demanding transitions that occur during this stage of life can also contribute to adjustment difficulties (Simmons, Burgeson, Carlton-Ford, and Blyth, 1987; Midgley, Feldlaufer, and Eccles, 1988).

The Transition Into Adolescence

Enormous biological, cognitive, and psychosocial changes mark the end of childhood and the beginning of adolescence. Biologically, early adolescence is defined by the onset of puberty, "a period of growth and development more rapid than any other phase of life except infancy" (Carnegie, 1989, p.21). From about age ten through the early teen years, hormonal and somatic changes occur in height, weight, body composition, and reproductive capability. Pubertal maturation is strongly associated with the onset of sexual activity and other behavioral changes, such as participation in social activities with older peers.

Cognitive functioning expands during adolescence from a here-and-now focus to include the ability to project to the future, think hypothetically, and reason abstractly. This carries implications for prevention practices since it suggests that adolescents can challenge ideas critically and "conceptualize the long-term consequences of unhealthy behavior and imagine themselves as adults" (Steinberg, 1991, p.19). Yet, cautions Steinberg, adolescents also experience psychosocial changes that may link feelings of invulnerability to risk behaviors.

Adolescence is popularly described as a time of heightened egocentrism, volatility, and experimentation with risky behaviors. But this "storm and stress" view of adolescent development is currently being challenged. Steinberg and other scholars note that *most* adolescents experience normal psychosocial development and emerge with a strong sense of self, close relationships with parents and peers, and the ability to make responsible decisions. However, youth at risk tend to develop psychosocial traits such as persistent underachievement, detachment from parents, and isolation from peers.

The increased importance of peers and belonging to a crowd are second only to puberty in marking the transition from childhood to adolescence. Close emotional ties to parents are challenged as adolescents begin to exercise their independence and individuality. For youth already experiencing stress due to parental divorce or remarriage, latchkey supervision, or poverty, adding the discord of school change heightens their vulnerability to developing problems.

As adolescents look beyond the home to gain a sense of themselves, they turn to peers for the advice and support previously sought from parents.

Puberty heralds significant changes in adolescents' social environments as well. The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development concludes that among the most dramatic aspects of this stage of development is the transition from elementary to secondary school. Adjusting to the new academic and social roles of secondary school challenges even the most self-confident adolescents, and can be particularly stressful to the more than seven million youth already vulnerable to high risk behaviors. For these youth, the middle grades are a period during which rates for juvenile crime, pregnancy, suicide, depression, and alcohol and other drug use escalate (Lipsitz, 1980; Gara, 1984; Gilchrist, Schinke, Snow, Schilling, and Senechal, 1988).

Variations on a Theme

Several theories have evolved to help explain the difficulties that school transitions can create. While scholars debate the strengths of one theory over another, preventionists view them as variations on a theme, each helping to explain a piece of the overall picture.

The Timing and Discontinuity Theory. This pioneering research focuses on negative adjustment outcomes as indicators of transition stress. Several of these studies show that junior high school students experience declines in self esteem, grade point average, and participation in school and other activities compared to their experiences in the elementary grades (Fenzel and Blyth, 1986; Simmons, Burgeson, Carlton-Ford, and Blyth, 1987). Feelings of victimization and anonymity increase for seventh grade junior high school students compared to peers at K-8 schools. Other studies of the transition from junior to senior high school likewise indicate a decrease in grade point average, attendance, and participation in extra-curricular activities (Felner, Primavera, and Cauce, 1981; Barone, Aguirre-Deandreis, and Trickett, 1991). Felner (1981) cautions that these maladjustments are associated with a greater likelihood of eventually dropping out of high school.

These studies suggest two hypotheses that researchers continue to grapple with. The first suggests that adolescents experience stress when they are required to cope with multiple changes concurrently. The timing of school change with other life events may exacerbate the development of stress, adjustment difficulties, and problem behaviors. The second hypothesis suggests that the abrupt change from the child-focused elementary school to the performance-focused secondary school is a powerful stressor during early adolescence.

The concept of timing, or the "synchronicity of life transitions", emphasizes that the gradual adjustment to one change before confronting another benefits the coping process (Simmons, Burgeson, Carlton-Ford, and Blyth, 1987, p.1221). In their longitudinal study following the transition from sixth to seventh grade, Simmons and colleagues (1987) conclude that confronting multiple life transitions can spur declines in self esteem, school performance, and participation in activities. These findings are consistent with those of Hirsch and Rapkin (1987) who find that while phobias wane as adolescents adjust to the middle grades, physiological changes increase, self esteem drops, and the perceived quality of school life diminishes dramatically.

Timing may also help explain why girls report a significant increase in psychological turmoil compared to boys during the transition to secondary school (Hirsch and Rapkin, 1987). Researchers note that gender differences in symptoms of depression and hostility emerge during the early teen years, and girls appear to be more vulnerable than boys (Simmons, Burgeson, Carlton-Ford, and Blyth, 1987). Since girls reach puberty earlier and date sooner than boys, they may experience heightened stress during school transitions.

Multiple school changes also appear to produce significant decreases in academic achievement and attendance for some students (Felner, Primavera, and Cauce, 1981). Based upon several studies, Crockett, Petersen, Graber, Schulenberg, and Ebata (1989) conclude that the timing and discontinuity of two school transitions during adolescence is much more difficult to adjust to than one. This suggests that inner city and low-income youth may be more vulnerable to developing behavior problems associated with school change because they have a higher rate of residential mobility than their more stable suburban peers.

When youth are faced with the stressors induced by transitional changes, their ability to successfully cope with multiple problems becomes critical (Simmons, Burgeson, Carlton-Ford, and Blyth, 1987). However, coping itself may become difficult if at the same time adolescents are uncomfortable with their bodies; with their families because of a move, divorce, or unemployment; with their peers because of new gender roles; and with school because of the more complex secondary school environment. Coping, it seems, is easier if youth have an "arena of comfort" in their lives (Simmons, Burgeson, Carlton-Ford, and Blyth, 1987). The premise is that if some aspects of their lives are stable and comfortable, then adolescents will more successfully manage the stressful aspects of their lives.

The Environmental Theory. More recent longitudinal school transition studies conducted by Feldlaufer, Midgley, and Eccles (1988) shift the focus of adjustment difficulties from adolescents themselves to the school environment (Fenzel, 1989). These studies cite compelling evidence that declines in academic achievement, motivation, and self-perception following a school transition are less a consequence of adolescence as a developmental stage than of systematic differences between elementary and secondary classrooms. The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development wrote in agreement that "a volatile mismatch exists between the organization and curriculum of middle grade schools, and the intellectual, emotional, and interpersonal needs of young adolescents" (Carnegie, 1989, p.32).

Based upon student, teacher, and observer perceptions of the classroom environment before and after the transition to junior high school, researchers identified various sources of mismatched needs, skills, and opportunities (Feldlaufer, Midgley, and Eccles, 1988; Midgley, Feldlaufer, and Eccles, 1988). Compared to the elementary grades, junior high school classrooms place greater emphasis on discipline and control, offer less intimate student-teacher relationships, and allow fewer opportunities for creative expression and independent decision-making. With fewer cooperative learning tasks and greater emphasis on working in groups by ability, junior high school students are more likely to receive public assessments and comparisons of their abilities which may lower their perceived level of competence. Eccles (1991) also reports that junior high

school teachers feel less effective in the classroom and more distrustful of students than elementary teachers. Both of these beliefs have been linked to drops in student motivation and performance, and may be partly explained by transition difficulties.

While Eccles and her colleagues do not refute the timing and discontinuity theories, they suggest that changes in the school environment can minimize the risks associated with the co-occurrence of life events. They recommend that young adolescents either attend K-8 schools or that middle/junior high schools provide a more developmentally appropriate social and educational environment through homeroom activities, flexible scheduling, exploratory learning activities, and heterogeneous class groupings. These specific recommendations support the more general recommendation to reorganize the middle grades into middle schools rather than junior high schools. Middle schools aim to provide a core curriculum, instructional practices, organizational structure, and climate consistent with the developmental characteristics of young adolescents. This, in turn, is intended to ease the transition from the elementary grades (Filby, Lee, and Lambert, 1990).

Transitional Life Events Theory. Building upon the timing, discontinuity, and environmental research, Felner and Adan (1988) offer a theoretical approach that also takes into account personal characteristics and attributes of the school setting. Their transitional life events approach assumes that all changes in life require adjustments, and that the range of difficulties associated with making adjustments reflect the environmental setting and one's personal history and coping abilities.

Felner and Adan (1988) refer to the "threshold of vulnerability" as a benchmark from which to hypothesize expected difficulties negotiating school changes. For youth behaving above their threshold, negotiating school change tends to be easier because they have solid coping skills, are achieving academically and socially, and have few risk factors in their lives. For youth behaving below their threshold, school change may be associated with negative consequences because of concurrent risk factors such as living in poverty, entering puberty, or other stressors that tax their coping resources.

Consistent with the notion of discontinuity, the transitional life events approach recognizes that the complexity of the new school environment and the school's capacity to respond to student needs affects the way adolescents adapt to secondary school. Felner and Adan (1988) explain that the organization of secondary schools, the rigorous academic demands, and the social pressures to interact with students of varying ages from multiple feeder schools may cause stress for the adolescent in transition. They add that adaptation can be further threatened by the limited capacity of teachers and administrators at larger schools to be responsive to individual needs.

The Role Strain Theory. Other recent school transition studies conducted by Fenzel (1989) suggest a different vantage for understanding the potential for increased strain during times of change. Life changes are viewed as a process of gaining and surrendering new roles. For students entering the middle grades, role changes are reflected in the new expectations from parents, teachers, and peers. When these expectations are conflicting, confusing, or demanding, Fenzel claims adolescents may develop role strain and manifest problem behaviors and stress.

The differences in these theories may be as important as their similarities. Common to the research across these perspectives are the findings that peers help adolescents mediate stress during the transition from elementary to secondary school and that peers influence alcohol and other drug use (Simmons, Burgeson, Carlton-Ford, and Blyth, 1987; Hirsch and Rapkin, 1987; Barone, 1991; Steinberg, 1991). Berndt's (1987) study of friendship patterns following school change indicates that social adjustment can be stressful because youth need to re-establish their social world. He estimates that it takes adolescents nearly a full school year to form new friendships. For adolescents who enter secondary school with close friends or a stable cohort of peers, adjustment appears to be considerably less stressful compared to their more socially isolated peers (Berndt, 1987; Hirsch and Rapkin, 1987; Barone, 1991).

In addition to adolescents lacking strong peer support, young adolescents influenced by older peers engaged in risk behaviors appear to be particularly vulnerable to developing psychosocial and behavioral adjustment problems (Reid, Martinson, and Weaver, 1986). During adolescence, peer groups assume an important role in establishing norms and standards of behaviors. Since drug-using crowds form during the early adolescent years, and there is considerable peer pressure to join them in secondary school, preventionists note the importance of countering this pressure by encouraging positive peer pressure.

From Theory to Practice

Building upon the above discussed theories, other researchers link coping with life changes to the goals of prevention. According to them, transitions during adolescence pose risks and challenges as well as opportunities to intervene and promote a positive life course (Felner, Farber, and Primavera, 1983; Schilling, Snow, and Schinke, 1988; Steinberg, 1991).

Over the years, the goals of prevention have taken new shape. Beginning with roots in epidemiology, the early prevention studies focus on understanding the causes of disorders and predicting their rate as a function of their association with life events. The goal of prevention from this perspective is primarily to reduce the incidence of psychosocial, psychiatric, and physical disorders. Since then, applied researchers have gained a greater understanding of transitions, stress, and coping. Currently preventionists are targeting the more far-reaching goals of fostering healthy environments, lifestyles, and behaviors as well as competencies and effectiveness in producing positive adaptive outcomes (Felner, Farber, and Primavera, 1983; Benard, 1991). In an effort to accomplish these goals, applied researchers and preventionists propose interventions based upon three general prevention approaches.

First, the *situation-focused approach* aims to prevent the development of adverse outcomes associated with certain situations. Hellem (1990) and Elias, Gara, and Ubriaco (1985), for example, presuppose that young adolescents often lack the skills, knowledge, and experience to "negotiate successfully the predictable changes associated with their transition" to secondary school (Hellem, 1990, p.303). The interventions that they propose are supported by Cowen's research (1985) that suggests that improving adolescents' coping and problem-solving skills will reduce the rate of stress, absenteeism, and depression associated with school change. As

adolescents' self-efficacy increases, it is further assumed that problem behaviors or use of alcohol and other drugs are less likely to develop (Hellem, 1990).

Second, the *transition-oriented approach* combines skill-building with competence development. Schilling, Snow and Schinke (1988), based upon the earlier work of Bloom (1981) and Cowen (1985), propose interventions that provide skills and information to adolescents along with school-based social reinforcements and problem-solving mechanisms. School-based supports such as buddies, small group orientations, or training teachers and students to welcome, orient, and assist incoming students are found to ease the coping process associated with school transition stress (Schilling, Snow and Schinke, 1988).

Third, the *active task mastery approach*, based upon studies by Felner and his colleagues (1983, 1988), suggests that if adolescents are actively involved in mastering specific adaptational tasks, then the stressors of life transitions and the difficulties of coping are likely to be minimized. This approach is based on the notion of resiliency, shifting the focus of prevention from reducing or containing stress to promoting the achievement of satisfactory levels of adaptation to life changes. To adapt, adolescents entering the middle or high school grades may need to:

- reorder their assumptions and expectations about roles, status, interpersonal relationships, familiar environments;
- redefine their roles as they move from childhood to adolescence to adulthood; and
- reconstruct their support network since school changes are associated with rapid and dramatic shifts in social and family relationships.

Adapting to life changes resiliently, rather than avoiding the adverse consequences of stress, may promote more positive long-term outcomes and increase one's abilities to deal with other potentially stressful events.

A Sense of Belonging

Issues as complex as the onset of alcohol and other drug use or the susceptibility of developing related problem behaviors require equally complex preventive interventions. One starting point could be creating a sense of belonging for children and youth who otherwise may experience feelings of alienation, abandonment, and a hopeless future. And that sense of belonging may be particularly valuable at school during times of transition, when children and youth are particularly vulnerable and perhaps more open to intervention (Steinberg, 1991).

Studies of resiliency in childhood identify as key to effective coping a strong sense of belonging and confidence; that is, a belief that the multiple changes and disruptions that occur throughout life will predictably turn out well. This kind of resiliency contrasts to the learned helplessness that hampers coping and is present in those experiencing serious psychological and social problems (Benard, 1991).

That this sense of belonging is missing for many young adolescents is not news to teachers and preventionists who struggle to help them successfully manage changes and disruptions in peer, family, and school relationships. Although there is no current census of transition programs, most middle and junior high schools make some attempt to meet the basic needs of students in transition. Cornille, Bayer, and Smyth (1983) identify hundreds of programs that fit into the following two types:

- The Buddy System. Buddies range from a trained peer host to a spontaneous appointment of a student to conduct a tour and provide peer contact for a few days or weeks. Sometimes the match is based upon class assignment, gender, language ability, bus route, or interests.

- Orientations. These usually include a school tour, and an information packet that might include a map, description of curricular and extra-curricular activities, and references for parents.

Counselors acknowledge that both of these types of programs are designed to promote a sense of belonging by helping students make new friends, meet new teachers, and find classes, lockers, and buses, though they barely scratch the surface of what is needed. Though adjustment usually occurs during the first several weeks, some students invariably face special difficulties due to a disability, early or late maturation, limited social skills, or because their economic, ethnic, or linguistic background is different from the general student body.

It is clear that a one-time welcoming effort to a new school is not an adequate preventive intervention if the aim is to create a true sense of belonging. It is also clear that the majority of transition programs are limited in scope, highly localized, and not well-funded or staffed, leaving little formal documentation for preventionists to draw upon.

Of the few examples of transition programs that are documented and evaluated, most use curricular materials designed to promote social competencies through stress reduction techniques and problem-solving skills. Programs like the Sixth Grade Transition Groups (Hellem, 1990), the Coping With Junior High School Training Program (Snow, Gilchrist, Schilling, Schinke, and Kelso, 1986), and the Orientation Treatment Program for Mobile Transfer Students (Berg-Cross and Flanagan, 1988) aim to "inoculate" young adolescents from the effects of perceived difficulties. In descending order of difficulty, sixth graders identified the following fears about leaving their elementary school: 1) fights, 2) pressure to use drugs and cigarettes, 3) general peer pressure, 4) parental problems, 5) trouble at school, 6) school work, 7) peer problems, 8) making decisions, 9) the new school environment, and 10) making new friends (Snow, Gilchrist, Schilling, Schinke, and Kelso, 1986; Mitman and Packer, 1982). Middle grade students also report fears about contracting AIDS, gangs, and violence.

Students in the above mentioned programs are taught to address their fears through improving refusal skills and relaxation techniques; asking for help; recognizing impulsive behavior; monitoring negative self-talk; and employing problem-solving strategies that generate multiple solutions, project consequences, and implement solutions. Journal writing, role playing, and

heterogeneous cooperative group activities are often used to identify fears and propose solutions. Interviews with and surveys of the adolescents participating in these programs suggest that inoculation-type programs reduce fears about school change, offer basic skills to deal with certain situations, and mediate general adjustment problems. While these programs may ease the immediacy of stress associated with the transition from one school to another, they seem remote to the larger prevention goal of fostering a sense of belonging and coping with life changes.

An exception to the inoculation approach is the experimental School Transitional Environment Project, or STEP (Felner and Adan, 1988). This primary prevention effort is designed to assist young adolescents complete the expected transition to junior or senior high school by modifying key elements of the school setting. The school environment is reorganized to more closely resemble the elementary grades, with students attending all core courses together, regular student-teacher contact, and opportunities for informal social interactions. The role of homeroom teacher is restructured as well, serving as the link between students and their families, schools, and communities. In STEP, homeroom teachers are both instructors and social service counselors. By preventing students from experiencing school change as a stressful life event, STEP aims to help students cope better with other life stressors occurring simultaneously.

Lessons Learned

There are few school transition programs that tap the best of what we know about coping with multiple life events and fostering the development of healthy coping strategies. Drawing from prevention theory, the middle school research, and promising programs and practices, teachers and other preventionists can learn a lot about transitions, stress, and coping. Below are a set of sound guides to be considered in the development of school transition programs.

Who Should Participate in a School Transition Program?

A. The students most at risk of developing behavior problems or experiencing adjustment difficulties before, during or after a school transition should be the primary recipients of the intervention. They include:

- Young adolescents
- Youth entering middle or junior high school, particularly if the school receives students from multiple feeder schools and is organized departmentally
- Children and youth with multiple risk factors (e.g. school failure, depression, isolation from peers, dysfunctional family, poverty) and few protective factors (e.g. well developed social skills, sense of self-efficacy, close peer and family relations)
- Young adolescents who demonstrate in elementary school antecedent behaviors associated with academic failure
- Children and youth experiencing multiple school transfers
- Female, disabled, low-income, and minority children and youth (racial, ethnic and linguistic)

B. Since a normative school change may provoke stress and tax children and youths' coping skills, intervention should include:

- All transferring K-12 students and parents

What Should the Format of a School Transition Program Look Like?

A. The location of the intervention should be at a school site since that is the primary public setting in which children and youth are socialized and need an accurate and comprehensive orientation.

B. The facilitation of the intervention should include:

- Adult facilitators who are well-trained to counsel, refer, advocate for and support children and youth about personal and academic issues
- Male-female teams
- Peer facilitators who are well-trained to counsel, refer, advocate for and support peers or younger students about personal and academic issues

C. The implementation of the intervention may need to be staggered depending upon the target population. It should be timed as follows:

- The semester before a normative school change, e.g. to a middle, junior, or senior high school
- At the beginning of a school year for all transferring K-12 students
- On a to-be-arranged basis depending upon the rate of student transfers

D. The duration of the intervention should not exceed one hour for several consecutive days or across consecutive weeks.

E. The instructional strategies used to deliver the intervention should include:

- Participatory and self-discovery exercises
- Cooperative learning and heterogeneous grouping exercises
- Lectures, discussions, and question and answer sessions
- Assignments that involve the newcomer with continuing students, the school faculty and staff, and the community

What Should Be Included in a School Transition Program?

A. The intervention should be:

- Developmentally appropriate
- Sensitive to income, cultural, racial, linguistic, gender and ability differences
- Designed with high and clearly stated and reinforced expectations for success

B. The skills development component of the intervention should include:

- Stress reduction and coping skills
- Problem solving and adaptation skills required to manage normative and non-normative life changes
- Refusal and assertiveness skills to manage peer pressures
- Skills to promote self-efficacy in managing fears and concerns such as victimization or making new friends

C. The orientation component of the intervention should include:

- Information packets containing maps, brochures, school rules and registration materials for parents
- Guided discussions that distinguish myths from facts about the new school's academic demands and social expectations
- Documentation providing accurate information about curricular and extra-curricular activities and community services and resources
- School tour
- Buddies to provide immediate peer contact and to initiate the reconstruction of a support network

D. The environmental component of the intervention should include:

- Enriching the administrative functions of the homeroom teacher to include counseling and advocacy
- Placing same-grade peers together in classes and activities to reduce feelings of anonymity and pressures from older students as well as to create a more intimate environment in large schools

Throughout life, transitions are times of heightened risk as well as opportunities to develop and use effective coping skills. According to Werner and other resiliency scholars, the risks associated with transitions during childhood are minimized if buffers such as a caring adult and high expectations for success are present (Werner and Smith, 1992). To turn school transitions from a risk to an opportunity, then, prevention programming must move beyond skill-building to include interventions that provide children and youth a sense of belonging and a bright future. This can go a long way toward preventing alcohol and other drug use and related problems.

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